

# Through Their Voices She Found Her Voice: Women in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* Cláudia Maria Fernandes Corrêa

## Introduction

On January 20, 1996 the President of the Federative Republic of Brazil enacted Law #9394, which was a first attempt to recover the history and contribution of Africans and African-descendants in the construction of the Brazilian nation. The law introduced the study of the history of these peoples at all levels of education. At that time, some schools and universities began to train teachers to introduce the subject in a transdisciplinary form and, therefore, several works by African and Afro-Brazilians were re-read as African in different areas of knowledge and, especially in academic settings, more theses on the culture, history and literature of these peoples were written.

Eight years later on January 9, 2003, Law #10,639 replaced the previous law, mandating the teaching of black culture in the school system, and as a result, the question of Africa in Brazilian history gained more attention from all areas of the government and education. In addition, the general population paid more attention to the discussions involved. Consequently, there was a further impetus to revisit the history and culture of Africa and African-descended peoples. In view of this, especially the African cultural production (in English, French and Portuguese) and writers of African descent (both in the United States, the Caribbean and Brazil) in various genres gained prominence in academic circles. In particular, the rapprochement between the female writers (in the United States, Brazil and Africa) expanded as it demonstrates, in a sense, the stories of everyday women which, despite being told in different languages, have many similarities. One such example is the work of the African-American author Maya Angelou. In Brazil, she is known best

for her poem “*On the Pulse of Morning*,” which she recited at the inauguration of American President Bill Clinton in 1993. Since then, we have seen in Brazil her participation in such films as *How to Make an American Quilt* and the television series *Touched by an Angel*; in the literary field, Angelou appeared on the scene in 1997 when the first translation of her autobiographical work *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1971) was released and, since then, several comparative studies of the work in question can be found because Angelou’s narrative established such a powerful mirror relation with readers in Brazil. Readers can find reciprocity in the words of the African American writer, a reciprocity, which contributes to the understanding of the role of women, especially black women, in society.

## I.

Survival. This is a word that is implicit in the trajectory and settlement of the Africans who were taken to the New World, to the Americas. Victims of mercantilism, uprooted from their homeland, these people were enslaved and then taken to the United States and elsewhere, a place that wanted them as property, as a work force, but refused them citizenship.

Their humanity was denied, their culture, which included their gods, their religion and their music, was banished. But the worst and most devastating strike was made when their language, the means by which they expressed their views, beliefs and thoughts, was wiped out, for how do you say that you “are” when the web of signifiers you have always known is torn and you are placed on “water without boundaries” (Diedrich, Gates and Pedersen 17)? How do you say that you “are” in a language that is not your own once the Europeans had acquired the right over definitions? What is a person without his/her own language?

Since the beginning of slavery most of the battle over who could rule Blacks was fought by using the power of the word. Therefore Africans who witnessed the horrors of the Middle Passage, the “voyage through death” as Robert Hayden puts it, and their descendants who lived enslaved, suffered the beatings, the brutality and violence of slavery, fought not only for freedom. They fought for the right to *be*: the right to *be* a

person and to *be* respected as such. Thus each and every enslaved person represented the whole; each and every one of them was undeniably committed to defend a collective identity by remembering stories that were transmitted from generation to generation by the many voices that together form black experience in the United States.

Even having compelling stories is not enough. It is also necessary for them to reach the wider population so they could understand the reality of the plantations, so that they could feel the whips and hear testimony of the violence and brutality of the slave system. The path to move hearts, gain voice and visibility was constructed by using the power of the written word. Consequently, former slaves began writing their stories, the slave narratives, which became the basis of African-American literature.

As Henry Louis Gates Jr. puts it, the slave narrative was an attempt to become a “communal voice, a collective tale rather than merely an individual’s autobiography” (*Classic Slave 2*) which means that the slave narrators functioned as a spokespeople who wrote on behalf of those who had been denied a voice. These authors were very much aware that their people would be judged on every aspect by the evidence they provided that is, by the written account left by their narrators. Bearing this in mind, the slave narrators knew they had to perform two difficult tasks according to Gates: first, they had to connect the random events into a compelling pattern and second they had to make their odyssey an “emblem of every black person’s potential” (*Classic Slave 2*). By using words, slave narrators had begun to regain blacks’ humanity, integrity, culture and character—in sum, their identities. Hence, these first-person narratives came as a response to racism, social and economic exclusion and created the African-American autobiographical tradition. So, it is quite conceivable to think of the black autobiographical narrative as a vehicle to construct one’s identity, and consequently it is possible to agree with Jerome Bruner for whom the autobiography is a mode of constructing experience which is a personal expression that renders the internal dynamics of a life at the same time that it is also a cultural product.

As a consequence, the autobiographical discourse is a constitutive act designed to construct a possible reality of a life that can be negotiated

with others: interlocutors constitute the dialogical dimension of the narrative. The autobiographical process, therefore, involves a narrator located in the present telling the story of a protagonist who bears his/her name in the past. This narrator must go back over memory to narrate the situations in the past in order to organize facts.

Such discourse involves the presence of a witness. Márcio Seligmann-Silva states that the testimony “é, via de regra, ... fruto da contemplação: a testemunha é sempre testemunha ocular” (82).<sup>1</sup> The witness attempts to establish a bridge between the “I” from the present and the “I” inside him/her and as a result of this dialogue, the “I”, that is, the identity, will be constructed. Seen in this way, testimonial discourse is the discourse of someone that takes part in the events as an observer. His/her accounts are marked by the simple past and by verbs that express the experience in a direct way. The witness creates an existential proximity not only for the writer but also for the reader. The act of narrating one’s own life story offers the individual the possibility of communicating to others his/her impressions about the world in which he/she lives. It also presents the individual the opportunity to explore experiences through a different perspective. In the context of these facts, what is the role of the autobiographical narrative for African-American women?

## II.

How deep can a mark be?

Looking back in the history of the African-Americans it is obvious that the slave narratives which inspired the abolitionists and the abolition of slavery were mostly composed by men who, after escaping slavery in the South, related their experiences of moving from bondage to freedom. Many of these former slaves had the chance to learn how to read and write in order to administer the plantations of white masters, but later literacy became a tool in their hands against slavery. As a consequence, the autobiographical narratives were written by African-American men and literacy in general became a path to obtain a “certificate” of rationality and humanity because reason, according to the Enlightenment philosophy, could only be accessed by writing and its representations. Thus,

black men created a link between education and freedom: in education resided true freedom.

After the Emancipation freed African-Americans could re-establish certain institutions that had been disrupted due to the dynamics of slavery. One of them was family and with it came the need for food, clothing and housing. Soon women and children began working outside their homes and women noticed that two things had changed: first, the master that was white now turned to be black (because men were responsible for establishing the work contracts and they also received the payment on behalf of women and children) and second, women now had a double shift once they worked and when they got home they kept doing housework (Foner). Why women did not begin writing as a protest at this particular moment? Some slave women had access to education and had written their autobiographies at the time of Abolition and afterwards, but generally women's access to formal education was still very restricted. Even with the end of slavery and the investments made by black communities in building and establishing schools, formal education was largely a privilege reserved to boys and men. Owing to these factors, the voice present in the African-American literature was usually the voice of the male slave fugitive, the voice of the male preacher and the voice of the male politician, while the feminine voice was suppressed and/or adapted to a male world by these male narrators.

By saying this we are not affirming that African-American women were passive or hibernating in dark holes; on the contrary, there was an African-American female writing that existed in parallel to the black male canon. Such literature made use of the African traditions that had been articulated in the New World such as the culinary role, religions, music and mostly, the central role of women as guardians of the African tradition. In other words, a feminine autobiographical tradition had not been established at this point even though some African-American women had written some autobiographical narratives such as "Belinda, or the Cruelty of Men whose Faces Were Like the Moon" by Belinda in 1787 or "Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself" by Harriet Jacobs (Linda Brent) in 1861. A women's African-American autobiographical presence would emerge strongly only in the second

half of the twentieth century as a sign of the African-American people's consciousness and specifically as a result of the influence of two social movements: the Feminist Movement and the Civil Rights Movement.

Despite sharing a common experience of slavery, black women, contrary to black men, were face to face with questions of race and gender. Moreover, these women had the historical experience of being black and women in a very specific society, in a specific moment throughout many generations that has made of them possessors of a distinct discourse inside African-American literature. Therefore a categorization of black women's autobiography taking into account only race and gender attributes a complex relation between the text, the author and her experiences. However, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese has argued that an analysis based only on the double oppression (race and gender) does not offer a new theoretical category once black women and white women share the same sexual category and neither of the groups seems to relate to class whether in a particular or in a general form since both sex and race serve to representation, fabulation and myth.

Categories—man, woman, black or white—are socially apprehended and they are a result of acts or forms of identification. As a consequence, gender and class transform sex and race in barriers and forms of exclusion that can also turn out to be positive social values. That is why we point out that an analysis about the self representation of African-American women focusing on gender and class will not exclude the force of racism and sexism that structure the experiences of these women; on the contrary, to do so would repeat the myths that these writers tried to dissipate. Hence, it should be emphasized that African-American women's autobiography requires a justification for its existence and this need goes back to the idea of classification, specifically in the case of black women writers, which must consider the extra-textual conditions. The basic principle that guides this classification is history, beginning with the awareness of black women in relation to their condition both as black and as women.

We tend to think this awareness comes from the perception and observation that women have made of their predecessors: their grandmothers, their aunts, their mothers and themselves. Their grandmothers

may have been slaves, their mothers, aunts and their own sisters had also lived in the bondage of segregation, and therefore they carried the signs of oppression vividly on their backs, which means, they carried the marks of the lashes, if only psychologically. So, the daughters of the segregated south noticed that during all this time, their voices were not heard and the violation and degradation they had undergone were still ignored. In other words, the presence of African-American women in the autobiographical field was being constructed and they realized that the feminine African-American presence could not simply be inserted in the gaps left by men.

It would be necessary to (re)define the terms *woman* and *black* for society. African-American women's search for rights, as Barbara Christian has argued, was extended to those whom the rights to humanity had been denied (44–51). Their act of remembering would be imperative. This means that the reconstruction of the past was necessary so that light might be shed over the stories told by grandmothers, aunts and sisters of the segregated south bringing into the present the autobiographical past of these women.

For this process to happen, however, it would be necessary to dig into the past, reclaim and restore it, that is, for the stories of black women writers to be retrieved, it would be necessary to bring back the words of their predecessors and then establish a continuity. As a result, female African-American autobiography presents the experience of the individual as an emblem of the collective situation; it is a collective project in response to the external pressure that while directed to a white audience also speaks especially to black people because, in their long history of oppression, they share the comprehension of the double use of language as an strategy of survival and resistance. Therefore, as Selwyn Cudjoe has argued,

The autobiographical subject thus emerges as an almost capricious member of the group, selected to tell his or her story and to explain the condition of the group rather than to assuage his or her egoistical concerns.... the autobiographical statement emerges as a *public* rather than private gesture, *me-ism* gives

way to *our-ism* and the superficial concerns with the individual subject (individualism) give way to the collective subjection of the group. (280)

In the context of this collectivity, we could affirm that the female African-American autobiography becomes a “contact zone” (Pratt 4), that is, a site where different cultures meet, clash and struggle always in an asymmetric relation of domination and subordination. Writing becomes a locus in which black women made themselves co-present by means of their words and stories and therefore when they constructed their identities from their perspectives; they removed the stereotypes created and rooted in society by whites to (re)construct a new identity, one in which they could see themselves reflected. In sum, throughout the process of identity construction, the subjects represent themselves by means of texts that are responses to external tensions and which are constituted as a strategy of silenced minorities.

In contrast to African-American male writers, who, according to Michael Awkward follow the same patterns of competition which is present in traditional western texts, African-American female writers have a more harmonious relation once they search for other female models in an attempt to make a symbolic fusion with their predecessors (Washington 30–43). The autobiographical writings of these black female writers attempt to recover certain images and African elements that, although acculturated, are still part of the black imaginary as a constituent of their identities.

### III.

Language, Awkward suggests, can only be possessed by the individual when he/she populates it with his/her intentions (8). Such a proposition is very close to the meaning of the power of the word for Africans. In African culture to dominate the word was the same as to make things exist in the world because the relation between the subjects and the words was intrinsically related to the construction of the self as a possessor of a story. The act of speaking was linked to the transmission of myths, legends, recipes and beliefs of African knowledge. In



the adaptation of these beliefs to the New World by enslaved Africans, women were given the task of keeping this knowledge. For African-American writers their cultural traditions and the stories that constituted autobiographical narratives were resources in the struggle for social justice at the same time that they transmitted histories to their own communities. The symbolic process of recovering the past is simultaneously an effort to reclaim history and to leave the past behind. Besides, this is also a process to retrieve roots, heal wounds, demystify identities and (re)construct new ones, now from the perspective of the black women.

Consequently, the Feminist and the Civil Rights Movements worked as watersheds especially for the African-American female writer as such movements were a site for the emergence of a counter-discourse. During the 1960s and 1970s the Civil Rights Movement was at its peak while the Feminist Movement blossomed. This convergence raised demands for books about the black experience, and, in particular, fostered a resurgence of autobiographies written by black women. These works took up questions of inequality and the double oppression suffered by these women: the oppression of race and gender. The discourse articulated within the Civil Rights Movement was based on race, focusing on structural issues such as segregation in housing, jobs and education. While perhaps subordinated to social goals, the Movement also desired to make the history of Africans and African-Americans available via a cultural discourse.

In a similar way, the Feminist Movement articulated problems based on gender, making women see their problems as being shared and rooted in the social structure especially in social institutions. However, both Movements could not reach the African-American women as far as their double burden was concerned. The Civil Rights Movement defied racial oppression, but at the same time showed that sexual inequality was institutionalized within the movement. Women's opinions were all too often overshadowed by male leaders, and they ended up being secondary participants and not equal partners within the Movement. These women's concerns received little attention and the aspirations of black society were articulated almost entirely by black men. The concerns of

black women, their objectives and issues were rarely discussed within the Movement. Despite never being able to create a discourse which focused on women in the Civil Rights Movement, some women began questioning male predominance. Women dissented and began to articulate their own concerns, even though such issues were not taken seriously by Movement leaders.

The lack of attention towards women's issues in political organizations was one of the factors that pushed women towards the Feminist Movement. However, even inside the Feminist Movement African-American women were marginal and their participation was problematic. The second wave Feminist Movement in the 1970s appealed to privileged women oppressed by gender. Similarly, there were no theories or concepts that could articulate the experience of black women which means they were still invisible, conceptually speaking. Therefore, there was little ideological appeal to black women within these movements. Moreover, the invisibility of black women within the Feminist Movement led to the separation of black women from the Feminist Movement and promoted a desire to develop black female organizations. The resurgence of black women's autobiographies made available a discourse concerning race and gender, a discourse that related to the double oppression suffered by black women was not present within the movement. Hence, African-American women's autobiographies were especially important at this point because they formulated a counter-discourse that allowed black women to name and identify the relations between their individual experiences and the social structures, between their personal problems and socio-historical issues.

Among these black women writers was Maya Angelou, who had been a militant in the Civil Rights Movement since 1959–1960 when, at the request of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., she assumed the coordination of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in the northern states. Besides reflecting Maya Angelou's commitment to the Civil Rights Movement, her first autobiographical narrative *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* published in 1970 is also a significant text in the literary tradition that articulates race and gender in the context of social movements (Brush 120–137).

Nevertheless, it is worth noticing that *Caged Bird* both belongs to and diverges from the black female autobiographies of the 1960s. The act of remembering, organizing and registering memories is a creative act, a means of self-knowledge, and also a reformulation of an individual's responsibility towards his/her own self because this (re)ordering is also a path to personal growth. Early black autobiographies were dominated by slave narratives because of the historical moment and the urge to protest for freedom. The autobiographical narrative *Black Boy* written by Richard Wright in 1940 was a milestone in a shift that opened up black autobiography to a diversity of interests. The need to leave a record about the past was less intense as African-American literature moved to other forms of protest against American society. Thus, Maya Angelou can be inserted in what Stephen Butterfield calls the third autobiographical period<sup>2</sup> when there was a resurgence of autobiographical narratives and a recovery of voice by the African-American women. As a consequence, we can affirm that the black female autobiographers form a tradition and as far as Maya Angelou is concerned, she ends up being 'a paradigm of a paradigm.'

By the time *Caged Bird* was published, Maya Angelou was known in the literary field due to her poems and other careers such as historian, actress, singer, poet and performer. In *Caged Bird* Maya Angelou portrays a world dominated by humiliations, oppression and losses, ably demonstrating how African-Americans were forced to grow up and live where possibilities were severely limited by society's inequity. The issue of gender is especially relevant to Angelou's production; her autobiography presents the way in which black women are violated by oppressive forces, including by their own black community. To live in the southern states, *Caged Bird* shows, was to be constantly confronted with difficulties, brutality, violence, for example, by the *Ku Klux Klan* whose members not only violated but also murdered black women, men and children. The *Jim Crow* laws of segregation relegated black people to the worst places of town. It is in these scenarios of physical as well as moral degradation that Angelou's journey takes place. She travels from "death" to "life," breaking the bars of the cage that imprisoned her. In this voyage from death to life, Maya Angelou learns her lessons from

many situations, but especially from a few women: Momma Annie Henderson, Grandmother Baxter, Mrs. Flowers, Mrs. Cullinan and her mother, Vivian Baxter. From their voices, Angelou finds her strength and her own voice.

#### IV.

Grandmothers have “been a significant force in the stability and the continuity of the Black family and the community” (Lupton 260), and we can observe such traits in Momma, Maya’s<sup>3</sup> grandmother from her father’s side, who is the moral center of her family. Her store was built in the center of the Negro section of Stamps and “over the years it became the lay center of activities in town” (Angelou 6). On a second level, Momma Annie Henderson is the carrier of traditions and stories that pass on orally from generation to generation; she is the protector of such stories. These stories and the wisdom of the black people will prove to be a strength that Maya will carry throughout her life. They represent safety and guidance to be referred to in moments when she does not know what to do.

The only African-American woman who owned a store in Stamps was Maya’s grandmother. A huge, black woman, who relied on God’s words and lived her life by the Bible, Momma is an important figure in Maya’s life due to her religious strength and obedience. In as sense, she is a metaphor for ancestrality carried from the past to the present via the words of Momma and her teachings. She told Maya about the harshness of slavery and how the Africans were taken from their land to the United States, but she still encouraged Maya to believe that freedom would come one day. She updates the Bible passages to their reality. Momma said that as freedom had come to Moses and the Jewish people, so black people’s day of freedom would come. It was only a matter of time:

Momma added that some people said that whitefolks had come over to Africa (she made it sound like a hidden valley on the moon) and stole the coloured people and made them slaves, but nobody really believed it was true.... Didn’t Moses lead the children of Israel out of the bloody hands of Pharaoh and into

the Promised Land? Didn't the Lord protect the Hebrew children in the fiery furnace and didn't my Lord deliver Daniel? We only had to wait on the Lord. (Angelou 196)

Hope is present in every word that comes from Momma. Hope, believe, and the Lord will come to you if you act right.

Because of her courage, Momma had become a heroine for Maya. In many ways, Momma was a groundbreaker: she was the only black who owned a store; she brought up her children as a single-mother; she was the only black who people addressed as "Mrs." She had enough money to lend to a dentist in Texarkana and she was brave enough to charge it back when needed. When Momma was humiliated by a white dentist who refused to treat little Maya, saying "I'd rather stick my hand in a dog's mouth than in a nigger's" (189), Momma reacted passively, and then Maya fictionalized a "supermomma" with supernatural powers who would make the dentist shake in fear and change the dentist's nurse into a sack of chicken feed just by waving her handkerchief. This episode made her imagine her grandmother transformed from a mere African-American southern woman to the status of "wonder woman," thus eliminating all negative characteristics and giving her the superiority that was necessary for her, in Maya's opinion, especially when pertaining to language. The Black vernacular that Momma used changes to sophisticated, correct and eloquent English.

Maya's feelings in relation to her grandmother are ambivalent: she does respect her; she also thinks she is beautiful and God-fearing, but she cannot understand why she does not talk back to whites. When three "powhitetrash" girls humiliate her grandmother, humbly she sings a hymn and acts as if nothing important had really happened, and Maya knew that "Whatever the contest had been out front, I knew Momma had won" (33). This situation places Momma in a position of superiority in relation to the whites. The old saying "an eye for an eye" does not apply to this woman because to forgive and forget are more important. Even though Maya thinks that her grandmother is weak at times, we can observe that what Momma does is to create survival strategies. Confrontation was by no means something that she could afford to do

since this would mean risking her life as well as her family's. Wisdom is an artifice she relies on to live in the segregated city. In a sense and in her terms, Momma beat the whites and gained the respect she deserved.

After moving to Saint Louis to live with her mother and her mother's boyfriend, Mr. Freeman, Maya, at the age of eight, is raped by him. Mr. Freeman was sued and at court, when asked if that was the first time he had touched her, she lied and answered affirmatively. On the same day he is released and later killed by "unknown persons," Maya's uncles. This rough justice was made by the order of Grandmother Baxter, Maya's grandmother from her mother's side. She is the opposite of Annie Henderson in the sense that she is white, having no traits of a negro; she has good relations in the society of Saint Louis and because of her "six mean children" (62) she is respected. Contrary to Momma Henderson who builds her reputation through work, Momma Baxter builds her reputation on gambling, which is a kind of work for her. As Mary Jane Lupton points out (265) both grandmothers are strong and independent and, I would add, groundbreakers for their times in different ways. Grandmother Baxter is also a source of strength for young Maya.

When Maya hears that Mr. Freeman was killed, she decides to go into silence because she had lied in court and she believes that her lies had caused Mr. Freeman's death. She only talks to her brother, Bailey Jr., and conceals herself in a colourless cocoon. After some time, her family sent the children back to Stamps, and Maya states that

The barrenness of Stamps was exactly what I wanted, without will or consciousness.... The resignation of its inhabitants encouraged me to relax.... Entering Stamps, I had the feeling I was stepping over the border lines of the map and would fall, without fear, right off the end of the world. Nothing more could happen, for in Stamps nothing happened. Into this cocoon I crept. (89)

Maya remains in a state of dullness, recognizing neither colours nor people. Things were meaningless until she meets the woman who would break through this state. Mrs. Bertha Flowers, the "aristocrat of Black Stamps" (93) is perfection in disguise for Maya. She was the opposite of

Momma; she spoke correctly, wore gloves, had rich black skin and for the rest of Maya's life she "remained ... the measure of what a human being can be" (94). The words which trapped Maya into isolation and in a state of being "dead" to the world will now be the bridge that will lead her away to life again. The encounters she had with Mrs. Flowers will be a kind of a workshop in living, and, little by little, Maya starts speaking again because as Mrs. Flowers told her:

Now no one is going to make you talk—possibly no one can. But bear in mind, language is man's way of communicating with his fellow man and it is language alone which separates him from the lower animals.... Words mean more than what is set down on paper. It takes the human voice to infuse them with the shades of deeper meaning. (98)

A reversal in the role of words takes place for Maya. If the words of the lie could imprison her, now words start to play a role of liberating her from her cocoon of silence confirming what bell hooks has proposed. According to hooks, the oppressed also fight using language and the objective of such fight is to "recover ... to rewrite, to reconcile, to renew ... words are not without meaning. *They are an action—a resistance. Language is also a place of struggle*" (hooks, emphasis added, 28). This is the sense in which to "infuse [words] with the shades of deeper meaning" (Angelou 98) is also an strategy of resistance and identity construction, and once such a voice makes itself present the oppressed begins his/her healing process. Maya learns to respect folk wisdom once, as Mrs. Flowers told her, all the wisdom of a people is inside it. By making this affirmation, Mrs. Flowers attributes value to the words of Momma.

Literature then became Maya's friend throughout her life and it also helped her understand both herself and the world around her. While reading, she momentarily escapes a difficult life, segregation, hatred of whites towards blacks, and vicariously experiences the colourful lives offered in books and the possibility of different, more promising and hopeful worlds. She shares a "hot cup of tea and milk with *Oliver Twist*" making it "the best of times and the worst of times" (100). Literature was Maya's first love and it comes to be her eternal companion. By start-

ing the healing process, Maya's words become an act of resistance one, as hooks put it:

African-American women must work against speaking as "other", speaking to difference as it is constructed in the white-supremacist imagination. It is therefore crucial that we search our hearts and our words to see if our true aim is liberation [...] we must be speaking with and not just speaking to.... Speaking out is not a simple gesture of freedom in a culture of domination.... It should be understood that the liberatory voice will necessarily confront, disturb, demand that listeners even alter ways of hearing and being. (hooks 16)

The lessons Maya receives from Mrs. Flowers were given through books of poetry and philosophical conversations. These lessons reinforce the values, beliefs and wisdom transmitted from generation to generation. Remembering the poems, repeating them aloud, and reflecting upon their meanings gives Maya a certain sense of power and makes her transcend her immediate environment.<sup>4</sup> On a second level, these lessons offer young Maya a closer observation of the relations of blacks and whites. Mrs. Flowers serves as a metaphor of young Maya's blossoming into adulthood, and she provides the necessary force to break the cocoon into which Maya had crept. She also encouraged Maya to listen to the country people because they represent the "mother wit" and "in those homely sayings was couched the collective wisdom of generations" (100). By observing that Mrs. Flowers updates and validates Momma's country knowledge makes Maya respect her even more and learn how to listen.

Another woman who has an equally important role in Maya's life, through a negative situation which Maya changes into something positive, was Mrs. Viola Cullinan. She was a white woman for whom Maya worked as a maid. Mrs. Cullinan decided that Maya's name, Margaret, was too long and she decided to call her "Mary" and told her friends to do the same, not bothering to remember her real name. This cruel act showed Maya another way in which whites despised blacks. Race did matter: a basic right of all human beings is to be called by their proper



names, and, as history demonstrates and, as Maya affirms, naming is a sensitive issue because blacks have often been deprived of this right:

Every person I knew had a hellish horror of being “called out of his name. It was a dangerous practice to call a Negro anything that could be loosely construed as insulting because of the centuries of their having been called niggers, jigs, dinges, black-birds, crows, boots and spooks.” (Angelou 109)

Mrs. Cullinan evokes slavery and the inferiority imposed on Blacks through her words. She also functions as a negative and, ironically, a positive force in Maya’s construction of her identity. While she does not acknowledge Maya’s status of a human being who should be respected, she is also a positive force in that she makes Maya question this viewpoint and refuse it. To make herself understood, Maya breaks Mrs. Cullinan’s favourite china on purpose making her employer call her by her correct name, thus compelling her to attribute her an identity:

Mrs. Cullinan cried louder, “That clumsy nigger. Clumsy little black nigger”. Old speckled-face leaned down and asked, “Who did it, Viola? Was it Mary? Who did it? [...] Mrs. Cullinan said, “Her name’s Margaret, goddamn it, her name’s Margaret! [...] I left the front door wide open so all the neighbors could hear. Mrs. Cullinan was right about one thing. *My name wasn’t Mary.* (emphasis added, 110–111)

As a consequence, Maya redefines herself from her own perspective. At this point she may not know who she is, but she does know what she is not. This moment conveys a very powerful and important lesson to Maya. The act of breaking her employer’s china can also be taken as a metaphorical break from Maya’s past: now that she knows what she is not, she can begin redefining herself and can also begin “being” someone. From this break comes growth, and two paradoxical points emerge. As Dolly McPherson writes, “while Angelou is growing in confident awareness of her strength as an individual, she is also becoming increasingly more perceptive about her identity as a member of an oppressed racial group” (46).

Owing to this confrontation, the liberatory voice of the oppressed begins to be heard, signifying the beginning of a healing process that, in hooks' words, "is linked with the overall effort of the oppressed ... to develop awareness of those forces which exploit and oppress; with efforts to educate for critical consciousness to create effective and meaningful resistance, to make revolutionary transformation" (hooks 30). After the end of their marriage, the parents sent Maya and her brother, Bailey Jr., to live with Momma Annie Henderson. Her mother, Vivian Baxter, who enjoyed the big city life of Chicago, could not bear to live in a segregated town or to simply adjust to things as they were. She chose not to stay with her children.

Maya is traumatized by the separation and the only way she could cope with the abandonment is to fantasize that her mother was dead because only a dead mother would leave her children alone that way. Maya thinks about her dead mother and the state of mourning in which she and her brother find themselves. According to her "I could cry anytime I wanted by picturing my mother ... lying in her coffin" (52). When the children receive Christmas presents what confronts them is the stark reality of their situation: they had a mother and a father who abandoned them. Some time afterwards, mother and children are reunited. Meeting their mother was not easy for the children. According to Maya, to describe her mother would be the same as to "describe a hurricane or the colors of the rainbow" (60). The moment Maya saw her she understood why Vivian Baxter had sent them away: she was too beautiful to have children, especially Maya who thought herself ugly. Maya does love her mother but at this moment, her love is overwhelmed by abandonment. Later on, Vivian will serve as a source of encouragement, but she is also irresponsible, leaving her daughter with her boyfriend, who rapes her. She is more like a shadow that will only guide Maya when she feels that Maya is ready to learn. Later in the book, when Maya decides to find a job, she is a voice of negativity as she tells her daughter that coloured people were not accepted in the streetcar company. These comments trigger a challenge to Maya because deep inside her mother knew her daughter's capabilities. Maya first feels disappointed, but then she "gradually ascended the emotional ladder to haughty indignation, and finally

to that state of stubbornness where the mind is locked like the jaws of an enraged bulldog. I would go to work on the streetcars and wear a blue serge suit" (265). Her mother offers encouragement and support: "That's what you want to do? Then nothing beats a trial but a failure. Give it everything you've got. I've told you many times, 'Can't Do is like Don't Care.' Neither of them have a home" (265).

Vivian is a complex character. Her notions of maternal bonds are distorted: she sends her children away; when they come back, she does not really pay too much attention to them. She is a material provider merely who acts as a mother only when she is confronted with the brutal rape her daughter suffered, but who later sends her children away again. I would stress that she cannot confront her mistakes and choices until she accepts being a mother and acts like one. At the end of the book, her position is transformed when she is turned into a grandmother; the circle is broken and she will in a sense embody both Momma Annie Henderson and also Momma Baxter in one, in order to nurture her daughter who is now a single mother herself. Symbolically, Vivian comprises the duality of preserving the traditions and the wit of her people represented by Annie Henderson and the modernity and sense of justice promoted by Grandmother Baxter. This "double consciousness" that brings to mind Du Bois's work, will flow and be reconciled in Maya when she gives birth to her son.

Believing she is a lesbian due to the changes in her body: her voice is heavy, her hands and feet are not feminine and she is a too-big Negro girl, she decides that she needs a boyfriend to establish her heterosexuality: "a boyfriend would clarify my position to the world and, even more important, to myself. A boyfriend's acceptance of me would guide me into that strange and exotic land of frills and femininity" (280). But what happens is that Maya gets pregnant from their first sexual encounter. She waits until she is eight months pregnant to tell her stepfather, Daddy Clidell—who lives with Vivian Baxter, Maya and Maya's brother, Bailey Jr. and with whom Maya had a real father-daughter relationship—who then tells her mother. Her mother asked her if she would marry the boy to which she answers she would not. Vivian Baxter then gave her the support, love and assurance that everything would turn out fine,

something which Maya had waited for so long and becomes at last, as McPherson argues, “the compassionate, loving mother of Maya’s childhood fantasies” (54).

The book ends with a scene that brings together all the women in Maya’s life. Maya is afraid of sleeping with her son because she fears rolling over and crushing the bones of the three-week-old baby. Ignoring her daughter’s fears, her mother takes the baby to her one night and places the baby on her side. The following day, she wakes up with her mother standing by her side and the baby sleeping soundly. Vivian Baxter then tells Maya, “See, you don’t have to think about doing the right things. If you’re for the right things, then you do it without thinking” (289). This scene evokes the awareness that Maya has reached. Starting as a girl with a fragmented awareness, Maya moves to the beginning of her growth, constructing her own identity. Through the influence of the women in her life, she actively confronts issues of race and institutions of power as well as “resurrects” herself after her “death” that occurs after rape and learns to accept herself as an African-American southern woman.

## **V. Final Remarks**

By the end of her first autobiographical book, the fragmented self of the young girl has begun to be reconciled. The birth of her son is highly symbolic in the sense that it closes the circle of a search for self. The selves are aligned together by power, wisdom, religion, the lessons in living that Maya learns along the way; she is also reborn fully to life and accepts struggles and challenges not as obstacles but as possibilities of growth leading her to understand why caged birds sing: they sing not because they are trapped but because they know that deep inside, no one can stand against their will to be heard, and when they sing their voices are strong enough to surpass the bars of the cage. The sounds that come from the cage are the sorrow of a wounded bird that elevates the voice in a prayer for freedom. Maya sings her history with many voices, the voices of all her ancestors and especially the voices of the black women who helped her find her own voice so that she could leave the cage and look back to it knowing why the caged birds sing: they sing because they know and hope that one day they will be truly free. Such a

novel speaks powerfully to African-descended peoples throughout the Americas.

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### Notes

- 1 My translation of this sentence: “is, as a rule ... a product of contemplation: the witness is always an eye-witness.”
- 2 In his book about the black autobiographical tradition, Stephen Butterfield divided black autobiography in three periods: the first period, entitled *The Slave Narrative Period*, comprehends the autobiographies written between 1831–1895; the second period, *The Period of Search*, covers works written between 1901–1961 and the third period, *The Period of Rebirth*, covers the autobiographical works written since 1961 and, among other works, the author included the autobiographies by African-American women and also Maya Angelou.
- 3 To make a distinction between the author and character, we refer to the character in the book by the name *Maya* and to the author by her name, *Angelou*.
- 4 McPherson, Dolly. *Order Out of Chaos: The Autobiographical Works of Maya Angelou*. New York: Virago, 1998.

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